

cry. I sat on the couch for fifteen or twenty minutes, coughing up sobs from deep places I never even knew I had. Nadia had ripped something away, torn aside the veil we normally wear every day to survive in the city. She made me smell life, feel it, touch it, taste it. She made me want...something. Something more, much more than I had now. She had made me see that there was more to life than just existing the best I could day by day. Life was to be lived; to be taken and shaken and sucked dry, used up. Every moment was precious. I wanted to reach out and touch her fire, bathe in it, be clothed with it.

Life. Nadia made me ache for it, fiercely, from my bones out. But inside I was scared, as well as excited: there was never adventure without risk.

Monday and Tuesday nights Talulah's stays closed, so they're my lazy days, my weekend. I spent the rest of Monday doing errands: stocking up on food, doing my laundry, the usual stuff. Every so often, vacuum cleaner going, or plate halfway to the sink, I'd pause and look over at the huge entertainment centre that took up more space than my kitchenette, and wonder: Why? And that, of course, was closely followed by: How? How had Nadia found out where I lived? She didn't even know my last name – at least, I hadn't told her. And how had she managed to get everything here so fast? And that all led back to why. Why was she doing this?

*You really shouldn't trust me.*

And then, of course, I'd have to put the plate down or turn off the vacuum cleaner, and play the disk again, just to reassure myself that I'd seen what I'd seen.

I slept badly that night, and my sleep was full of erotic dreams of a feral and primordial Nadia, a Nadia without inhibition.

I woke up Tuesday almost as tired as when I'd gone to sleep, and with my body giving me unmistakable signals that now it knew *exactly* what it yearned after. I sighed. I had to do something about this.

My laptop was ancient, a hand-me-down from Mom, with dysfunctional battery backup and zero compatibility with any known modem. So I stuck a diskette in my pocket and took the MARTA train downtown to the main Fulton County reference library.

I read first about research trends in computer-assisted composition. Nothing unexpected there: lots of gabble about Fairlights and courtcases pertaining to digital sampling and copyright, and one tiny article in an obscure journal about the possibilities of adapting computers so that physically challenged people could use light to compose music. There was a counter-article detailing why such light-parametered composition computers would, in practice, be impossible to use. I checked the author of the first article and found he worked at Columbia, in the music and computer labs sponsored by Kyoto-TEC. Ah hah. The article was dated two years ago. Nothing since then. Just as Nadia said: new stuff, and the prevailing opinion was that it simply couldn't be done. But Kyoto-TEC had watched the work done in their laboratory and decided differently.

Next, I looked up National Treasure provisions and

precedent-setting court cases. There it was, under *Decisions: Kyoto-TEC v. US Govt.*, and the date was about right, seven months ago. Jackpot. I hadn't brought enough disks for the whole thing, so I just downloaded the abstract.

I set up a search for Nadia and Amin in the out-of-town media files, and found two articles that were relevant. The first was nothing much, just a paragraph in the *Seattle Times* about three students graduating with double honours at the University of Washington. Nadia was one of them, graduating in dance and music theory. The second was more interesting.

It was dated eight months after the first – and ten after the piece I'd read earlier on the Kyoto-TEC lab researcher's theories. According to the paper, Nadia Amin, a promising young student enrolled at the Seattle Academy of Performing Arts, had blown the entire electrical system of the Gardner Annex while trying to perform something she called "Zeus and Semele: An Exercise in Light Composition."

I looked at the colour image of the gutted annex for a long time. Now I knew that it was at least possible for Nadia to be who she said she was. I was looking forward to getting home and reading the abstract of the court case, to finding out just what it took to be declared a National Treasure as opposed to a National Menace.

When I got home there was a message on my machine from my mother, reminding me that today was my father's birthday and I was supposed to be going over for dinner with the rest of the family. I'd forgotten of course. I dropped the disks on my couch and sprinted for the shower. The court case abstract would have to wait for tomorrow.

On Wednesday I woke up well after midday to the hot, still air of a coming storm. My skin felt tight and I had a headache; the room was stifling. I decided to risk overloading the ancient electrical circuits and turned on my window air conditioner to cool the room.

I always find it hard to concentrate before a storm. After I'd spent an unnecessary hour puttering about with breakfast and watching local news on my HDTV, I finally got dressed and settled down with my laptop and the abstract of the court case.

I couldn't understand the first couple of pages at all, gobbledygook, all of it: lists of obscure statutes and indictment codes, and lots of wherases and hereinafters. The air conditioner was labouring, making my head thump. I frowned and concentrated, and around page five the words began to make sense.

The judge, one Honorable Harriet Thurman, agreed to admit the testimony of expert witness Dr Schubert Macillvaney, psychiatrist. Macillvaney assured the court that Nadia Amin was not usually dangerous, except in certain, already described circumstances, and that in his opinion there would be no danger to the public should she be released into the custody of Kyoto-TEC, as long as stringent prec –

The AC coughed once, horribly, and the current in my apartment died. The words on my screen blipped out.

I sat in the suddenly dark room and stared at my blank screen. *Released into the custody*... What had Nadia done? Blown up another academy?

not development. Enjoyable enough but a bit middle-of-trilogy.

On the other hand **Xanadu**, edited by Jane Yolen (Tor, \$21.95), is a bit beginning-of-series, the first of what is described as a "prestigious anthology series." I am still undecided about this: just as the short story brings out all science fiction's strengths and hides its weaknesses (strange worlds versus cardboard characters) it can seem to do the opposite for fantasy, where the worlds are familiar but the characters should be new. This volume demonstrates this to perfection in "The Poacher" by Ursula Le Guin, a fine but minor piece tangential to the Sleeping Beauty story where we are all utterly familiar with where the story takes place and what the surroundings mean but can delight in the mind-set of the character who stumbles into the bramble hedge before the prince is due. The anthology is strong on big names even if some of them here only contribute small stories – Lisa Tuttle's easy-to-predict ghost story "Lucy Maria" and Tanith Lee's slight demon's-daughter story "Unnalash."

If second person stories are your particular bugbear you should avoid the two in this volume. In "To Scale" by Nancy Kress you are a boy with a macabre fascination for dolls' houses and in "Still Life with Woman and Apple" by Leslea Newman you climb into a painting of Lilith and Eve and strike a pose. The weakest contribution of all seems to me Stephen K. Brust's "Attention Shoppers," a remarkably undergraduate piece of verse not worth page-room.

However there are some substantial stories which make the volume worth its cover price, particularly Pamela Dean's splendid "Owlswater" about an apprentice magician's quest, and Eleanor Arnason's "The Hound of Merin" about an outcast in a society of warrior tribes. Arnason is apparently working on a novel set in the same society, and on the evidence of "The Hound of Merin" I will look out for the novel with anticipation. The best contributions, however, are short, sharp and perfectly hit their mark: Esther M. Friesner's chilling "Baby Face" about the effect of seeing the world with new eyes – eyes treated with fairy ointment provided by fairies who are the fairies of the old myths, feral and heartless – and William Stafford's poem "It Comes Lightly Out of the Sea" which deserves to become a classic.

Tad Williams and Nina Kiriki Hoffman's **Child of an Ancient City** (Legend, £7.99) is a lightweight cross between the *Arabian Nights* and *Dracula*, as a group of benighted Baghdad travellers fend off a vampyr with a story-telling contest. A mood piece mostly, well written but not at all to my taste.

It's a couple of hundred pages before you realize that Roger Taylor's **Farnor** (Headline, £16.99) isn't going to go anywhere. It is an absorbing, detailed and utterly convincing story but the gentle pace of the start peters out altogether midway, as if Taylor had been offered a series contract half way through the writing so had held off from a conclusion.

Farnor is the name of a person, a young farmer, who lives in a valley so cut off from the world it is years since the king's tithe has been collected. A sheep-worrying animal, a local lout with rudimentary magic and a band of mercenaries masquerading as the tithe-gatherers join to change everyone's life but particularly Farnor's when he finds he has rudimentary magic powers of his own which will, presumably, develop in volume two. Soon, please.

Finally, someone should try guarding the dreams and visions of Mike Jefferies, particularly in the area of character naming – you really can't call your hero "Denso" and expect to get away with it. In **Hidden Echoes** (Grafton, £8.99) Harry Murmers, a New York publisher, Denso Alburton, a fantasy writer, and Mya Capthorne, an environmental scientist, are kidnapped into a world full of clocks where time is, apparently, started and stored. It is explained to them that the Earth – aka "Paradise"! – was set apart from the other worlds at the beginning so that there would be one perfect, balanced world. Cracks in reality are opening up and various dragons, warlords and mythical monsters are falling through to Earth for a grandstand, Godzilla-vs-the-tank-corps, whoops-we've-all-read-H.G. Wells ending. Jefferies sure can make 'em up. If only he could make 'em half-way credible.

(Wendy Bradley)

## Greg Bear's Fantasy

### Chris Gilmore

Owing to a switch between publishers the two halves of this book, *The Infinity Concerto* and *The Serpent Mage*, were released in 1988 under the shadow of the much inferior *Eon* (brought out by Gollancz). In an afterword written for this edition, the author expresses his pleasure that they are now presented as a single volume, a pleasure I share almost as much as I deplore the clumsy and pretentious title.

**Songs of Earth and Power** by Greg Bear (Legend, £14.99 and £9.99) combines fantasy with an unusual degree of psychological realism, and concerns the adventures of Michael Perrin, an American teenager who is manipulated into

entering a most uncomfortable version of Faerie, Realm of the Sidhe. There he has forced upon him the role of pawn in a game played among many factions of powerful beings (human, semi-human, inhuman) who must operate according to laws they can't or won't explain. They set about "training" him, very harshly, in mental and magical disciplines (without saying what for of course). There is more than a hint of the analogous scenes on James Blish's *Jack of Eagles* – a book that has retained far more freshness than the better known *Cities in Flight* novels, incidentally. The upshot is that Michael is forced to grow up.

Here lies the principal virtue of the books. Michael's transition from "manchild" to man is depicted with extraordinary skill, which as a bonus confers reality on the context. The Sidhe Realm becomes believable because we see it through Michael's eyes, as he makes violent and sometimes heartbreaking contact not only with sundry malevolent entities of compulsive personality, but with the important concepts of sacrifice, atonement and obligation. Greg Bear is fascinated with the concept of a personality divided and recreated, often in incomplete form. Though this hasn't always worked to his advantage in other books, it becomes a vital element in Sidhe magic, which proves the ideal milieu for its deployment.

The first part ends with a fine set-piece cataclysm and Michael returns to Earth, but it is obvious that the story is far from over. The Realm is beset with moral and physical degeneracy, as the quasi-immortals who have been sustaining the whole artifice fall ever deeper into solipsism, ritual and accidie. When the collapse comes the Sidhe will be forced to return to their ancestral home – which is also ours. This provides the theme for the second half.

Here Bear ups the stakes even higher, and in two ways. First he has the chutzpah to introduce Mozart and Mahler as minor characters, then he prepares to tackle something almost unheard-of – the only parallel I know comes in the closing chapters of Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. The usual practice in writing of this kind is to maintain the integrity of the two realms – intercourse between them is allowed, but they remain distinct. Here, the Realm of Faerie is collapsing, so its inhabitants, creatures of great force and potency as they are, take on the status of refugees to be integrated and assimilated, no matter how distasteful the process may be for all concerned. This cannot be done without reference to the Serpent Mage, the hidden ruler of Earth, the oldest of intelligent beings, only sporadically sane, and undisputed master on his own turf. (The location of that turf provides